

Letting the British go

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We had this coming for a long time. At times, many of us even wished for it to arrive already, the day of finally waving them goodbye, if only to be done with it. Such a nuisance they were, always droning on about sovereignty and how special they were and squeezing the rest of us for concessions only to opt out in the last moment anyway.

And yet, now as it's there, I can't help it: I am kind of sad to see us Europeans part ways with the British.

And it looks as if they, now finding themselves all [isolated](#), have second thoughts, too, at least some of them. It's probably typical for divorces. The day the other is gone for good is when regret kicks in.

First, I surprise myself by thinking that a strong economically liberal voice in Europe might not be such a bad thing after all. Uncontested big government consensus all over Europe, with nobody left to speak for breathing space for the individual? Everybody patting each other's shoulders and agreeing that every last bit of the

blame goes to the bankers, leaving themselves innocent as babies? Call me a bloody neoliberal, but I find that thought unappealing.

Second, I don't feel very comfortable seeing European leaders refuse to [shake hands](#) with each other. Getting beyond that childish kind of behaviour was part of what the EU was all about, wasn't it?

But my main point of concern is about governance: How will this 17-plus-members fiscal union split off from the 27-members EU be governed? I don't see how the commission and the parliament, being EU institutions, can go on working for the new fiscal union against the expressed will of a member state, particularly since those two bodies themselves won't be crazy about the split-up of the Union they serve.

So, are we heading to a institutional rebuilding of the Union from scratch? And what institutions will we get?

Will Sarkozy push through his [agenda](#) of an "intergovernmental" union, all ad-hoc power wielding of state and government chiefs, unconstrained by powerful institutions on the European level, the fiscal union "commission" reduced to some sort of Van-Rompuy-style secretariat and nobody to look after the interests of the smaller states or the Union as a whole?

Or will the German penchant for supranationalism prevail, in defiance of Sarkozy's attempts at a "union method"? Will the fiscal union continue to be integrated by law, by self-assured commissioners and judges beholden to nobody but the noble idea of European integration? And where should public support for the re-creation of such institutions come from in these days of integration fatigue?

Or will we finally get a political union? A European government, responsible to a European parliament? A true one, with European parties and a European public sphere? As befits a Union that takes it upon itself to rule over all the taxing and spending of its members? As befits a Union where one part pays for the debts of the other without making a powerless protectorate of them?

Pick which version you like best. And which one you deem most likely.

The parting of the British might be rather the occasion than the cause for my misgivings. But still, this is not a day to feel happy, constitutionally.

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